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ABSTRACT

Information on the educational status of the disadvantaged child and a summary of progress in teaching him to read are presented. A description of a typical inner-city elementary school in New York City includes the school buildings, student population, reading programs, attendance of teachers and children, teacher education, achievement, and school rating. A summarizing statement estimates that 60 to 70 percent of all the children were poorly prepared for the education they were receiving and that almost half the teachers lacked sufficient training. The next section reviews reports of various people who have studied disadvantaged children and gives suggestions for improving the education of the disadvantaged. The teacher who cares is pointed out as a most important factor, as well as the teachers' and the administrators' willingness to experiment with innovative programs. It is also pointed out that many children learn to read in spite of severe handicaps if they have some factors in their favor. The final section describes current research studies which will supply many answers related to successful teaching of the disadvantaged. (DH)

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Teaching Reading to the Disadvantaged: Progress and Promise

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The disadvantaged children of the United States represent a very large segment of our present school population. When one is asked to list the disadvantaged, he can name the Indian children scattered throughout our land, the Spanish speaking children of the Southwest, the French speaking children of the North Eastern part of the United States, the clusters of poverty stricken children found in Appalachia, the poor children who live in almost every community in our country and finally the Black and Puerto Rican pupils who live and receive their education in our large cities.

Books, articles and other materials on the disadvantaged child refer mainly to the Black and Puerto Rican children who live in New York City, Washington, D.C., Detroit, Cleveland and Los Angeles where the Spanish-American child is substituted for the Puerto Rican.

As I prepared for this speech I found that American educators have written about and studied the Black children in the large cities almost exclusively and during the past several years have also considered the Puerto Rican children of New York City in particular. I decided therefore, to limit my discussion of progress and promise to those much discussed Black and Puerto Rican of New York City whom we know best among the disadvantaged.

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Progress in Teaching the Disadvantaged

My notes on the progress observed in the education of the disadvantaged were gathered from three sources. We have a wide assortment of information

which we have been gathering in the past twenty years during various kinds of teaching and observation in such cities as Washington, D.C., Syracuse and Rochester, New York, Cleveland, Ohio, a variety of the Western cities and during the past two years New York City. We have surveyed the books written 'about' the disadvantaged and have commented on the progress the authors have noted.

During the preparation period we read the research and short reports of various educators who have studied disadvantaged children in various U.S. cities.

We will comment on the findings from these three sources and summarize what might be considered as progress in teaching reading (and anything else to the disadvantaged). The promise of American educators to the disadvantaged will follow in summary form.

1. The Sheldon Notes

Progress has been made in teaching reading to the disadvantaged from the preschool to the high school level. City-based educators began to worry and write about the problems of the disadvantaged in the early 1950's. Special sessions on the problems of New York City-based Puerto Rican children were held at IRA and ICIRI meetings in the 1950's. Similar sessions related to Black disadvantaged pupils were held about the same time.

We cannot comment on what happened to the New York City plans for Puerto Rican pupils. We have seen books published on the problem in the offices of various New York City elementary schools, but see no evidence of existing programs which follow the suggestions of the early Puerto Rican studies.

Since the USOE and various foundations turned their attention to the problem of the disadvantaged, dozens of studies and experiments have taken place in New York City and in other large centers, aimed at finding a means of aiding disadvantaged pupils. My own observations in New York City made in 1968, 1969 and 1970 have given me a great many notes on both the positive and negative side of the education of Black and Puerto Rican pupils in grades K-6. Unfortunately for this paper, we have had no opportunity to visit junior and senior high schools in New York during this time.

Let me describe a New York elementary school we have visited recently and which is more or less typical of 13 other schools we know from previous visits.

School X was erected in 1890 and has had three extensions added to it from 1900 to the present time. Temporary buildings are found in a fenced area to the rear of the building and house primary children. The staff has 100 teachers, more than one hundred aides, five administrators and a variety of special consultants including a reading specialist and several remedial reading teachers.

The school was originally designed to house about 800 pupils. At first the children all lived within easy walking distance and from 1890 to the 1950's walked home for lunch. Today 2100 children use the original and added facilities. Almost all these children are fed in the school and hundreds of them are bussed from neighborhoods distant from the school.

Sixty-five percent of the children are of Puerto Rican background. Many came to New York from Puerto Rico during the past year and speak

Spanish fluently but have little or no facility in English. Virtually all the rest of the pupils are Black, many of them from very poor families and these pupils have lived in their present neighborhood for 5-10 years.

The pupil composition then is formed from the poor of the city. More than half of the pupils speak Spanish comfortably and are just beginning to speak English. Poverty affects the attendance of younger pupils in particular while a casual family interest causes many of the upper grade children to "skip" school frequently.

The teaching staff is almost entirely white and of the 100 staff members only 5 speak Spanish. The teacher aides are Black and Puerto Rican women and men from the neighborhood. Most of the aides speak Spanish and help the teachers communicate with the children.

We observed the reading program of this school with considerable interest. We found interesting and somewhat appropriate instruction in several kindergartens and in the top level first grade classes. Other well taught groups were found in the other grades.

As the pupils were originally grouped homogeneously - based roughly on assumed intelligence and other tests, formal and informal - each grade level had at least one group of children who were able and very verbal. The teachers of these groups carried on well planned lessons in reading no matter what material or method was used. In this particular school three distinct approaches to reading were being used with most pupils. One procedure was based on a much advertised program which guaranteed each child success. The standard basal approach was used with another group of children. A phonic - individualized reading procedure was used with

another section of children. The first and third approaches were sponsored by special funds, while the basal approach was the usual procedure in this school.

All of the instruction was in English regardless of the language of the pupils and in the first and second grades confusion was obvious on the part of the pupils, aides and teachers. Again at each level and with all materials, some children made good progress.

The educational background of the teachers varied greatly. Among the men in particular, a lack of adequate preparation was noted. Some of the women were filling in for departed teachers and seemed lost. At each level however, well educated and very able teachers were guiding children with some success.

Pupil attendance was 70% on the day we visited School X. Most of the absentees were young children. The principal said that parents hesitated to send children to school on cold or unpleasant days. We noted that 4 or 5 children were absent in most of the classes we visited.

Teacher attendance was a grave problem in this school. Twenty-seven of the 100 teachers were absent and the Assistant Principal who served as our guide said that this was not an unusual number of teacher absentees. The reading specialist, with whom we visited, told us that the children in this school were suffering from the problem of language, absenteeism on their part and the teacher's, a lack of conceptual development, poor motivation and random teaching. He estimated that of the 300 sixth grade pupils, 50 to 100 would be able to cope with learning problems with adequacy in the next few years. Another 100 or so pupils were struggling to learn the content materials but with great difficulty. At

least another 100 were so handicapped in speaking, reading and writing that they would not qualify at the minimum level for the seventh grade.

We visited many of the sixth grades in the school and found Spanish speaking children taught on a first and second grade level and responding in a less than satisfactory manner. In the classes of more able students, we found clusters of Black and Puerto Rican children who were making good progress in language usage, could read and write on a fourth grade to sixth grade level and seemed able to read social studies, science and mathematic materials.

School X was rated low in an announcement of test scores printed in the New York Times this spring. Progress was demonstrated rather specifically in the performance of 50-100 sixth grade pupils and with groups of children at the other instructional levels. We would estimate however, that 60 to 70 percent of all the children in the school were poorly prepared for the education they were receiving. It would be hard to evaluate the quality of teaching, but we would estimate that at least half the teachers we observed needed a great deal of help before they could teach ordinarily English speaking children. How they could be helped to teach Spanish speaking children was beyond me.

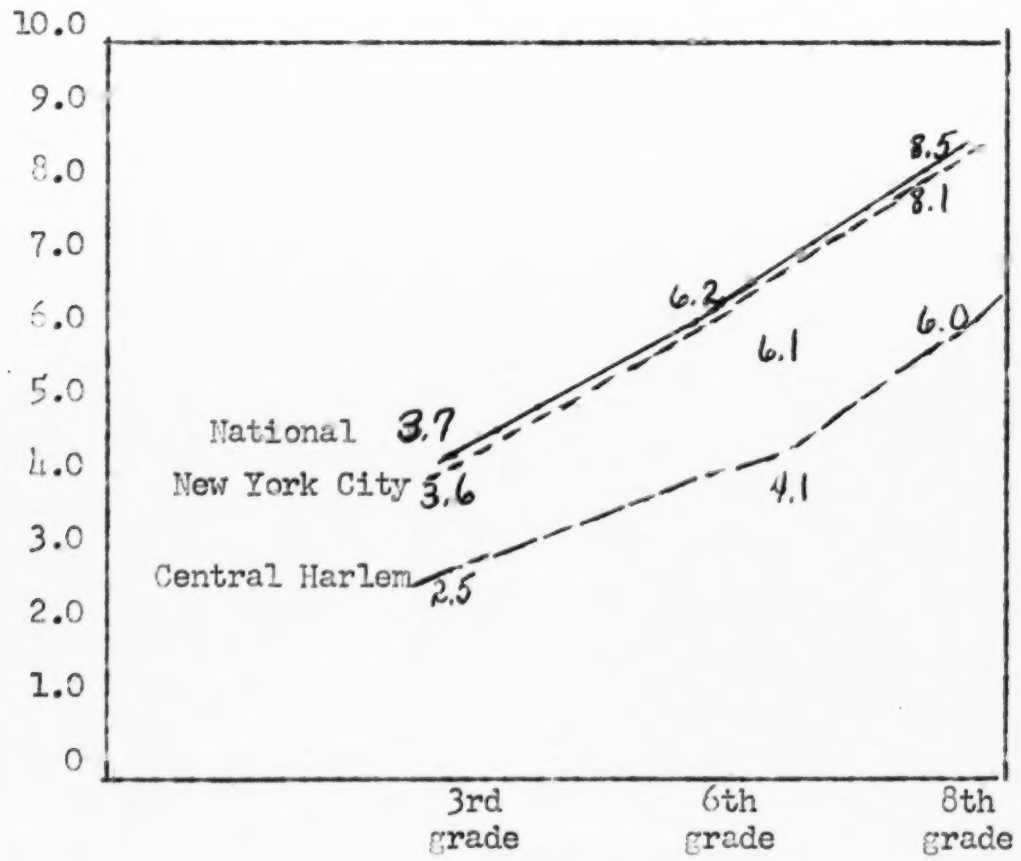
The Messages from Educators

A great number of distinguished and less well known educators and pseudo-educators have written about the disadvantaged child in the past 10 years. Some of the writers have reflected a despair and melancholy in their writing and have developed the impression that the cause of the disadvantaged is hopeless. Others write more optimistically and leave the readers with positive impressions and the feeling that certain methods,

materials, personnel can help the disadvantaged overcome their handicaps.

Below we have included a chart of reading comprehension of national, New York City and central Harlem readers. The chart gives a clear picture of the status of the disadvantaged children by contrast to the general New York City child population and that of the nation. (1)

Median equivalent grades in reading comprehension for Central Harlem and New York City pupils compared to national norms.



[1]Francis Keppel, The Necessary Revolution in American Education. New York: Harper & Row, Publishers (1966), pp. 39-41.

At the third grade level the National reading score is 3.6, Central Harlem 2.5. At the sixth grade level, National is 6.2, Central Harlem 4.1. It is probable that scores of clusters of Black and Puerto Rican pupils from areas in the Bronx and Brooklyn would show even greater discrepancies at both the third and sixth grade levels as do these scores.

Taba and Elkins[2] presented many views on the needs of disadvantaged children in a significant book. On teachers they say:

"What kind of teachers are needed; what must they be and know? First of all, students need to see that the teacher cares, that she is a human being who is interested in them personally and cares about what happens to them. Such a teacher finds ways to make a student feel "good about himself." Sometimes these ways amount only to a word of praise for something well done. It can be a small remark such as "Aren't you the handsome one today," as the teacher greets the students in the morning. It can be a written note of praise that goes home to let his parents know how much the student is learning. But above all, the fact that the teacher cares is demonstrated by the effort she makes to shape a program to awaken the students, to help them with their problems of learning, and to share with them their triumphs of achievement, however small they may be.

"But often "caring" involves more than that. It means helping students through some crisis. Schools often give children tasks that are utterly impossible for them to face, tasks set by an unknown outside force for a reason they do not understand."

Taba and Elkins[3] also comment on the experimentation which should develop in schools which house the disadvantaged. They state that

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[2]Hilda Taba and Deborah Elkins, Teaching Strategies for the Culturally Disadvantaged. Chicago: Rand McNally and Company (1966), pp. 265-6.

[3]ibid. pp. 280-1.

"Perhaps the greatest contribution administrators can make is to support experimentation. Experimentation always involves some risks and hazards--the risk of making errors, the hazard of replacing "tried and true" skills with new ones. Administrators need to support teachers in such periods of transition, and to allow for the relatively slow pace that it takes to perfect new strategies of learning and teaching. Most teachers, as well as administrators, expect too much too soon and give up before the new practice has had time to ripen and to become fully productive."

"Experimentation also involves creating flexible work teams instead of depending on the usual "standing committees" to invent and install innovations. It requires establishing new channels of face-to-face communication, ways of discovering leadership, and new ways of using existing leadership in the school. There is psychological resistance to considering teachers as experts to help other teachers, and to arranging free time for this purpose."

"Finally, any innovation requires some outside consultant help, if for no other purpose than to articulate problems that are difficult for insiders to see or to express. Outside consultants also can gather more differences in points of view, perceive more problems and view them more objectively, than can those who have lived with the situation for a long time. An especially useful consultant function is that of establishing a methodological sequence in planning and testing new programs, such as having a careful diagnosis precede plans, and planning precede action."

Baratz and Shuy[4] offer many suggestions to teachers who deal with Ghetto children. They state that: "The continued failure of programs

[4]Joan C. Baratz and Roger W. Shuy, Teaching Black Children to Read. Washington, D.C.: Center for Applied Linguistics (1969), p. 114.

for ghetto children that offer more of the same, i.e. more phonics, more word drills, etc., have indicated the need of a new orientation towards teaching inner-city children to read. Any such program must take into account what is unique about the ghetto child that is impairing his ability to learn within the present system. This paper has suggested that one of the essential differences to be dealt with in teaching inner-city Negro children is that of language. The overwhelming evidence of the role that language interference can play in reading failure indicates that perhaps one of the most effective ways to deal with the literacy problems of Negro ghetto youth is to teach them using vernacular texts that systematically move from the syntactic structures of the ghetto community to those of the standard English speaking community.

Riessman[5] comments positively about the disadvantaged.

"Action Speaks Louder. The deprived individual is most interested in learning the fundamentals: the three R's and the physical sciences. Far less interest is shown in art, music, and the social studies, as currently taught. New approaches to teaching these subjects must be found. Perhaps music forms more attractive to the disadvantaged, such as spirituals, jazz, and blues, could be introduced more frequently in music courses. Ethnic considerations in relation to art, music, and the social studies could also be taken advantage of more fully. For example, Negro history probably would interest Negro children, and might serve as a good opener for the development of further interest in history and the social studies in general."

"There are numerous techniques appropriate for the physically-oriented slow learner: role-playing can be utilized in countless ways

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[5]Frank Riessman, The Culturally Deprived Child. New York: Harper & Row, Publishers (1962), p.32.

such as acting out a history lesson (George Washington signing the Constitution), teaching arithmetic and economics by playing "store" and "bank." The role-playing itself is a marvelous stimulus for discussion, and it appeals to the deprived child's love of action. It provides for a much more vivid presentation and fits in with his desire for excitement and movement. The teacher, however, has to develop discussion out of the role-playing scene, and not simply capitulate to children's enjoyment of the acting-out process. The role-playing should be a trigger for advanced discussion and thinking."

Riessman[6] also advocates masculinzing the school and noting the need to encourage the masculine values of the underprivileged boy.

Commenting in the Deutsch studies, Riesman[7] reports these findings:

"1. Deprived children appear to be poor in the use of verbs, but much better with descriptive adjectives.

2. Deprived children seem to understand more language than they speak (their "receptive" linguistic ability is much better than their "expressive" language).

3. Deprived children demonstrate a surprising ability for phantasy (as seen in the clown situation).

4. Deprived children express themselves best in spontaneous, unstructured situations."

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[6]Riessman, pp. 34-35.

[7]Riessman, pp. 76-66.

Alan Cohen[8] gives many examples of the progress of disadvantaged pupils. He states that "Perceptually Dysfunctioning Children Can Learn to Read." In spite of the claims of some advocates of perceptual training, many perceptually dysfunctioning children will learn to read if they have other things going for them. It is folly to underestimate the human organism's ability to compensate for dysfunctions. One factor may play a major role in determining whether or not a child reads, but that major factor gains its status only in relation to others.

"If a child with perceptual dysfunctions lacks the psycholinguistic background conducive to success in reading, then the perceptual dysfunction appears to be a very important factor. If he lacks, in addition, motivation to read, perceptual dysfunction looks even more important. Add a family history of low school achievement and low achievement expectancy by his teachers and community, and the presence of perceptual dysfunction looms as an insurmountable impediment to success in reading. On the other hand, give a perceptually dysfunctioning child any one or combination of these factors and he usually parlays them into success in reading. Why? Because the human organism is always imperfect and always using its assets to compensate for its liabilities whether those liabilities are psychodynamic, physiological, or perceptual.

"For example, an emotionally disturbed, withdrawn Puerto Rican girl (factor 1) who rarely spoke (factor 2), whose oral-aural language experiences were minimal (factor 3), whose family was illiterate in both Spanish and English (factor 4), but who was perceptually sound (factor 5),

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[8]S. Alan Cohen, Teach Them All to Read. New York: Random House (1969). pp. 96-97.

had resorted to fantasy through reading (factor 6). In spite of factors 1 through 4, which usually contribute to reading disability, Maria had a tremendous need to read (factor 6). Reading was a convenient escape mechanism for her. She also had some advantages, such as factor 5, and others not included in diagnosis. As a result, she read on grade level in grade 4. Clinton had severe perceptual dysfunctions. He was disoriented in space, hand-eye coordination was poor, and visual imagery was weak. But he had a literate mother who insisted that he read and who spent the first three years of Clinton's schooling drilling him nightly on phonics. When he was fourteen years old, Clinton was a "phonic plugger," able to hold to his grade level by sounding out each word. He was a crippled reader, but was not disabled. He paid a high price for his school success and obviously needed some type of perceptual training, but even with his handicap, he had learned to read because he had other advantages.

Although Clinton and Maria learned to read, however, we cannot expect such success for most socially disadvantaged children. They often do not overcome this handicap of visual perceptual dysfunction because they do not have very much else going for them."

Cohen[9] also points out how the culturally deprived low achievers can become "self-directed learners" if we teach them how. Individualized instruction can be achieved with a 30-to-1 pupil-teacher ratio, if schools are willing to innovate. Delinquents, low achievers, and high achievers appear to learn well in skills centers. Learning increases and behavior problems decrease. In every experiment that used a variation of the skills centers program with all types of pupil populations, teachers reported a reduction of classroom discipline problems.

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[9]Alan Cohen, pp. 246-48.

"On the average, skills centers have been yielding 2.0 to 2.5 months' growth in reading achievement scores per month of operation. For severely retarded readers in grades 4 through 9 this gain may not be sufficient to allow them to catch up with on-grade achievers, who tend to accelerate even faster with skills centers. Add to this the very limited areas of the curriculum now covered by skills centers, and we are left with a great deal of work yet to be done in the education of disadvantaged children."

"How much more will be done? The facts are that an atmosphere of fear and distrust of anything really new prevails in schools, in general, and particularly in inner city schools. The innovations presented are limited to practical and conservative suggestions in the hope that they will provide the interested, committed educator with the resources to launch a program with some hope of success."

Cohen[10] has also stated that both basal readers and the paper back book can be useful in teaching children both to read and learn the academic content.

Bereiter[11] and his colleagues have given a great deal of direction to those who are interested in the education of the young. For example, each of the following quotations sight Bereiter's point of view and suggestions for action.

"...radical departures from established practices of early childhood education are needed. It was shown that preschools for disadvantaged children that are patterned after the familiar upper-middle-class

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[10]Cohen, 268-9.

[11]Carl Bereiter and Siegfried Engelmann, Teaching Disadvantaged Children in the Preschool. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc. (1966) p. 19.

nursery school have not succeeded in meeting the challenge of providing a faster than normal rate of learning in areas significant for school success. An examination of the structure of the upper-middle-class nursery school suggested an important reason for its inadequacy as a model of preschool education for disadvantaged children: the nursery school compliments the influences of the privileged home instead of duplicating them, and thus exerts many of the influences of a lower-class social environment while minimizing many of the influences that have been responsible for the superior intellectual development of upper-middle-class children. It is therefore incompatible with the requirements for a compensatory educational program for disadvantaged children.

3. Articles Based on Research and/or Ideas

Many answers related to the successful teaching of the disadvantaged will come from the studies and demonstrations being conducted by those now working with the Black and Puerto Rican pupils, Ocean-Hill Brounsville school leaders are attempting to revolutionize the schooling of their children.[12] They are teaching five-year-olds to read with some success. Each of the young children can have an older pupil as a buddy - helping them to learn effectively. A reward system in which disadvantaged learners are given food, candy, money and clothes has proven very effective in teaching them to read.

In schools where Spanish-speaking children predominated, Spanish is taught in the kindergarten first and second grade with English developed for conversational purposes only. English instruction is developed in grades 3 and 4, while Spanish gradually becomes a second

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[12] "Ocean-Hill Brounsville Revolutionizes School," Reading Newsreport, May-June 1969, pp. 18-25.

learning code in the fifth and sixth grades.

In a Manhattan Hell's Kitchen, school children are led to play out experiences and talk through what will be presented in reading.[13] The children in this poverty area need much verbalization related to their experiences so they can trust the language they read and also solve unknown words contextually.

The CRAFT project carried on as part of the USOE first grade study by Harris and others demonstrated that disadvantaged Black first-grade children can learn how to read. Even though the subject children had scored quite poorly on readiness tests they achieved well ahead of the expectancies suggested by these tests.

The CRAFT study indicated that these disadvantaged pupils could learn to read with the same procedures used with middle-class white pupils if taught in a superior manner. This meant that the materials had to relate to their experiences and that all their reading follow their related verbal and physical activities.

Deborah Elkins points out that disadvantaged pupils must learn concepts basic to learning other things and must be provided adult leaders who will aid them develop the ego strength which energizes learning.[14]

Parallel to the many studies and experiments with disadvantaged pupils we find efforts made with parents and other adults related to the lives of the young. Workshops for parents, held in Philadelphia,

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[13] "A Laboratory in Hell's Kitchen," Reading Newsreport, February 1969, pp. 32-37.

[14] "Instructional Guidelines for Teachers of the Disadvantaged," Deborah Elkins, The Record, April 1969, pp. 593-616.

demonstrated that parents can become interested and helpful to their children once they understand the developmental steps needed in learning to think, see, talk and read.[15]

A study conducted in Racine schools suggested that a major problem of the disadvantaged, particularly in the first grade is the omission of instruction.[16] The study found that inner-city teachers omitted far more than the outer-city teachers in their teaching. Recommendations suggested that relevant curriculum be substituted in the inner-city so children could receive an adequate instructional program.

Tutoring in schools has been reported as successful when certain factors were observed.[17] It was found that timing of tutoring was important in terms of learning and that the structure and consistency of lessons were of special importance. Children needed a careful appraisal of their skills. They were found to be particularly weak in their basic concepts.

It was found that social reinforcement of children by tutors aided pupils. It was also suggested that children needed effective basic teaching and not remediation in the tutoring situation.

A final study returns the educator to what he has long since known that the biological problems, such as poor intrauterine nourishment, premature births, deficiencies in protein, iron and vitamins cause poor children to develop slowly and to be physically smaller and duller in

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[15] "Can Disadvantaged Parents Motivate Children for Reading?" Adeline W. Gomberg, The Record, February 1970, pp. 451-454.

[16] "How do Inner-City Teachers Use a System-wide Curriculum?" Richard G. Larson and George A. Beauchamp, The Elementary School Journal, March 1970, pp. 331-341.

[17] "Tutoring in a Slum School," Lillian Zack, et al, The Elementary School Journal, October 1969, pp. 20-27.

their intellectual responses than middle-class pupils.[18] Miss Scarr, the researcher, who confirms what we have suspected suggested that the school serve as a community health center with day care for young children.

Our Promise to the Disadvantaged

It has become clear that our present general efforts in educating the disadvantaged have been poor. Our results have lacked success. As we study and observe what needs to be done, it is clear that the school program cannot be effective as it now stands, but must shift its attention to the parents, the unborn children and actually serve as a health and educational center from the time the poor city child is born. A nursery program for all poor children is an absolute must if we are to prevent disaster overcoming our poor and eventually the cities in which so many of them live.

We need nursery centers which will provide physical and intellectual and emotional satisfaction to children on a continuous basis from the age of 0 to 5. These nurseries can aid in developing a clear and sound language pattern in both the poor Black and white and in the other languaged children.

Our school program needs to consider a languaged centered nursery-kindergarten program for the 4-6 year old, which provides an all day program of recreation, physical care, food and all kinds of language oriented learnings.

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[18] "Needed: A Complete Head Start," Sandra Scarr, The Elementary School Journal, February 1969, pp. 236-241.

We need to raise the standards of teachers in the schools teaching the poor and decrease the teacher-pupil ratio. If children live in a non-English environment we need to provide teachers who can provide the other language child with comfortable learning in his own language.

We must change our strategy of education so our poor will come first and our middle-class second, or our system will disintegrate through waste, disorder, and eventually revolution. The books and learning are available. We know the problem. We can and will provide the answer. Our disadvantaged will be educated.